

Preface to the Paperback Edition

When *Ordinary Life* was first published most stories about illness were told as narratives of triumph. They depicted people battling their disease; remaining optimistic; and, in the end, expressing gratitude for their illness as an opportunity for personal growth and transformation. As I struggled through chemotherapy for breast cancer while caring for my young family, I could not manage this transformation. I was cranky, angry, and ungrateful. I wrote *Ordinary Life* to tell the untriumphant story of how illness left me feeling frightened, alone, and without the emotional resources to deal with this threat to my life and my family.

I feared, however, that people would find my book too depressing or would judge me for not rising above my difficulties. Neither happened. The reviews of *Ordinary Life* were positive and enthusiastic, and the book was chosen for the Rose Kushner Award. Many people went out of their way to express their appreciation to me for writing my story. Some people newly diagnosed with cancer insisted that ignoring stories like these did nothing to diminish their fear of what might happen. Family members of people who were ill thanked me for helping them understand their loved ones' experience. Even those who felt less disrupted by their illness found much of my experience familiar.

My fears about the reaction to *Ordinary Life* reflected my awareness of our cultural reluctance to acknowledge illness, a reluctance that has only deepened in the last decade. There is still very little room in our society for illness and disability. The premium placed on perfecting one's body creates an uncomfortable environment for those whose bodies are damaged by illness or disability, financial and other limits on the availability of health care represent our societal unwillingness to address our growing health

needs, and the continued reassurance from self-help gurus that the proper behavior and attitude can forestall or cure all illness minimizes the challenge the ill and disabled face. Even as our population ages and most of us are dealing with illness in ourselves or our loved ones, our often impersonal and increasingly strained health care system allows little opportunity for the serious conversation many of us desire about how to live with pain, physical limitation, the daily grind of illness, and the fear of death. Most of us understand there are things in life we cannot control, and we long for a more honest grappling with how devastating illness can be.

Fewer memoirs of illness that deal with the more difficult aspects of illness have been published of late. The market continues to be dominated by self-help manuals and uplifting stories of triumph. Hopefully this will change. In a culture that denies the reality of physical and emotional illness we need stories of people and their families who face the disruption, fear, and loss that illness entails. These stories contribute to a badly needed conversation about the challenge of living with illness or disability.

As I reread *Ordinary Life* I realize I could not write this story now. As my children move enthusiastically into adulthood and my husband and I busily engage with work, family, and friends, I can recall the outline of my experience with breast cancer but not the substance or feel of it. Perhaps this is the luxury of having an illness that plays itself out as an acute episode. Nonetheless, *Ordinary Life* represents for each member of my family a part of our life together. As we encounter illness in ourselves and those close to us, it is humbling to recall the strains illness placed on us but encouraging to remember the very human ways we stumbled together through it all.

Kathlyn Conway
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